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Preventing Abuse and Neglect Of The Elderly

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Family Life

The United States House of Representatives Select Committee on Aging estimates 5 percent of all elderly in America are being abused, neglected or exploited annually. The National Committee for Prevention of Elder Abuse estimates that one million older individuals are abused or neglected each year in the United States.

The Tennessee Department of Human Services indicates 5 percent of the elderly population in the state is approximately 40,000 people. Currently, the Department of Human Services works with 2,000 cases per month. If these estimates are accurate, many cases of elder abuse and neglect are going unreported in Tennessee. Instead of enjoying their later years, many older citizens are forced to live in fear in their own homes, suffer pain and neglect or die from injuries inflicted by others.

Elder abuse often goes unreported because victims are ashamed, unaware of how to report abuse or fearful of retaliation if they report the abuse. Elder abuse and neglect can be prevented or stopped if family members monitor the well-being of elders and report known or suspected abuse and neglect to the Tennessee Department of Human Services. Tennessee law requires that any person (family member, friend, neighbor, doctor, dentist, etc.) who has reasonable cause to suspect that an adult has suffered abuse, neglect or exploitation must report it. Contact the local office of the Tennessee Department of Human Services in writing, by telephone or in person. Check the telephone directory for the telephone number of the local county office of the Department of Human Services. All 95 Tennessee counties have a local office of the Department of Human Services.

What is Abuse?

Various types of abuse occur. The following definitions describe the scope of abusive situations:

Self-Neglect: Isolation, depression and immobility can lead to self-neglect. Elder persons may not keep themselves, their clothes or their

homes clean and free of health hazards. They may neglect to take medicine, keep appointments and pay bills. They may not eat safe and nutritious foods. Self-neglect can become life threatening.

Neglect: Neglect of an elderly person by a caregiver may be unintentional neglect. The caregiver may forget to provide basic needs or lack the ability to care for the elderly person. Deliberate neglect of the elderly occurs all too often. Intentional failure on the part of the caregiver to meet the basic needs of the elderly person is unlawful.

Financial Exploitation: Caregivers who are responsible for handling money or paying bills for an elderly person may neglect this responsibility to conserve money for their own inheritance. In some cases, the caregiver steals the victim's money, car and possessions or uses them to manipulate their elderly friend or relative.

Emotional: Victims experience emotional and verbal abuse. They may be threatened, humiliated or kept isolated from family and friends. Often the elder's self-esteem is damaged. Emotional abuse is difficult to detect.

Physical and sexual: Broken bones, bruises, cuts, burns and severe trauma may be evidence of abuse. A caregiver may deliberately administer excessive dosages of medicine to restrain the elderly. Often the victim will make up stories to protect the abuser.

Characteristics of the Abuse Victim

The elder abuse and neglect victim can be described as follows:

- Usually female
- 75 years old or older
- Widowed/divorced
- Lives alone or with abuser
- Dependent on the abuser
- Physically or mentally impaired
- Frail or chronically ill
- Isolated

Self-Neglect

Self-neglect is a serious problem. The results of self-neglect can be just as detrimental to the well-being of the elder as abuse inflicted by a caregiver or family member. Self-neglect often occurs when health fails and financial resources are inadequate. The following characteristics indicate self-neglect.

- Frail or chronically ill
- Widowed/divorced

- Female
- Living alone
- Reduced resources
- Minority
- Solitary lifestyle
- Reduced social supports
- Reduced social interaction (often due to death of spouse, friends or caregiver)

- Decreased coping skills (decision-making, depression, alcoholism)
- Loss of self-esteem
- Inability to accept changes
- Inability to acknowledge need for help
- Inability and/or unwillingness to accept help
- Mental impairment/mental illness

Signs of Abuse and Neglect

Look for signs of abuse and neglect when monitoring the lifestyle of the elderly. If one or more of the following are detected, abuse may have occurred.

- Injury that has not been cared for properly
- Injury that doesn't fit with medical history
- Bruises, welts, discolorations on upper arms, especially old and new bruises at the same time
- Burns or cuts
- Sunken eyes or cheeks
- Evidence of inadequate care
- Poor hygiene
- Soiled clothing
- Lack of aids such as canes, etc.
- Malnutrition or dehydration
- Evidence of excessive medication (drowsiness)

Characteristics of the Abuser

The abuser is usually a relative of the victim. Because of the close relationship, elders find it difficult to report abuse. The abuser may also be a caregiver or friend hired by the elderly person to assist him or her with household tasks, food preparation and the management of financial resources. The following characteristics profile the abuser:

- Usually relative of the victim, most often son or daughter
- Often has alcohol or drug abuse problem, chronic medical condition or financial crisis
- Financially dependent on victim for home, car or food
- Under stress
- History of violence in family

Preventing Elder Abuse and Neglect

Elder abuse and neglect can be prevented. Frequent contact with the

elderly can help family members evaluate their health status, living conditions, quality of care and emotional well-being. In some cases, daily telephone contact or personal visits may be required.

The following are suggestions to help prevent elder abuse and self-neglect:

You can help prevent elderly abuse and neglect.

- Learn the facts about elder abuse.
- Promote the elderly's involvement in activities that require social contacts with others.
- Encourage elderly persons to develop a social support network. Elderly people should have daily contact with family, friends or neighbors.
- Develop a neighbor-to-neighbor program. A daily telephone call can help monitor the well-being of seniors. Report needs to family, church or community social service organizations.
- Establish a Widow-to-Widow program in the community.
- Adopt an elderly person. Keep in touch with them throughout the year. Visit them, provide food or small gifts and help them be involved in the community.
- Encourage participation in Meals on Wheels, the Senior Citizens Center, the Nutrition Site, Extension Homemakers or civic/community/religious groups. Home-delivered meals and programs for senior citizens can reduce isolation.
- Transportation can help prevent isolation. Help provide transportation to senior citizens.
- If you know or suspect that an elderly or disabled adult is being abused, neglected or is not receiving the proper care, report the abuse to the county office of the Tennessee Department of Human Services; Adult Protective Services.

You can protect yourself from elder abuse and neglect.

- Develop a social support network. Contact family, friends or neighbors daily.
- Be willing to accept changes.
- Be willing to accept help from others. Be willing to ask for help.
- Enhance assertiveness skills and self-esteem. Elders have rights. Ask for help.
- Report abuse even if the abuser is a family member. Call the county office of the Tennessee Department of Human Services.

Check local telephone listings for the number.

For additional information on elder abuse prevention, contact the following resources:

National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse

c/o Institute on Aging
The Medical Center of Central Massachusetts
119 Belmont Street
Worcester, MA 06105
508/856/0011

The program of the National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse includes research, advocacy, public awareness and information and training for professionals in gerontology and related fields who work to prevent abuse.

National Resource Center on Elder Abuse

810 Ist. Street, N.E.
Suite 5007

Washington, D.C. 20002-4267
202/682/0100

The National Resource Center on Elder Abuse provides informational publications, research data and resources on elder abuse prevention.

**University of Tennessee
Agricultural Extension Service**

The University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service has an office in all 95 Tennessee counties. Check your local telephone directory for a local listing. The Extension Service has educational materials on elder abuse prevention, care of the elderly, planning for the later years of life and related topics. In addition, home-study courses, workshops and seminars are available on a variety of family life education subjects.

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